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Peepholes into the dark world of international spies

"Too Secret Too Long." Chapman Pincher. 638 pages. St. Martin. $19.95.
"MI6: British Secret Intelligence Operations 1909-1945." Nigel West. 266 pages. Random House. $16.95.
"Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence Assessments Between the Two World Wars." Edited by Ernest R. May. 545 pages. Princeton. $29.50.

In the era of the two world wars, the reputation of Britain's intelligence services was legendary. They were regarded as the height of undercover efficiency and an example to other agencies — particularly the infant American intelligence organizations.

MI5, which like the FBI is a domestic counter-espionage agency, ran the remarkably successful "Double Cross" operation during World War II in which German spies were detected and "turned" as fast as they were introduced into Britain.

And MI6, which has espionage and intelligence-gathering functions on the international scene and is the parallel of the CIA, was responsible for the "Ultra" operation that broke the supposedly unbreakable German Enigma codes.

But the years since World War II have not been kind to British intelligence. Soviet "moles" such as the notorious Kim Philby have had a field day, and the services have been plagued by the disclosure of a succession of scandals. The record hardly suits the image of success that had been projected to the outside world.

In "Too Secret Too Long," Chapman Pincher, a London journalist who specializes in intelligence matters, contends that the basic reason for the failures of British intelligence is the ineffectiveness of all departments concerned with security, especially MI5.

In an earlier book, "Their Trade Is Treachery" (1981), Mr. Pincher disclosed that there were official suspicions that Sir Roger Hollis, head of MI5 and the British equivalent of J. Edgar Hoover, had been a Soviet agent. Perhaps, Mr. Pincher suggested, this was the reason that the Cambridge Ring — Philby, Maclean, Burgess and Blunt — was able to operate with impunity, for its members to have escaped punishment and for other serious security breaches.

Alarmed by this disclosure, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher assured Parliament that Hollis, who had since died, had been "cleared" while, in fact, an investigating commission had found the case against him "unproven." In his latest book, Mr. Pincher returns to the fray and provides new evidence of Hollis's possible role as a double agent.

One of the major weaknesses of the case against Hollis was the lack of an apparent link between this apolitical bishop's son and Oxford dropout — he was a sometime drinking mate of Evelyn Waugh — and the communist underground. Mr. Pincher found these links while investigating Hollis's nine-year career in China as a businessman and part-time journalist during the 1920s and 1930s.

The tendency of intelligence agencies is to bury their mistakes in their secret files, so final proof of Hollis's innocence or guilt will probably never be determined, but as far as this reviewer is concerned, Mr. Pincher has made a convincing case. All in all, this is a fascinating and intriguing book and must reading for anyone interested in the real world of spies.

In "MI6," Nigel West, another British writer on espionage, casts a wider net. A history of the Secret Intelligence Service from its founding in 1909 to the end of World War II, the book makes it clear that the organization's record of achievement is spotted. Mr. West, who has established himself in earlier books as a serious student of British intelligence, provides a vast amount of detail, including organizational charts and code names, to back up his arguments.

In the beginning, MI6 was overshadowed by Naval Intelligence in expertise, fieldwork and manpower. After World War I, considerable effort was expended on doomed efforts to overthrow the new Bolshevik regime in Russia, including two botched attempts to assassinate Lenin.

This emphasis on anti-Soviet activities blinded SIS to the implications of Hitler's rise to power in Germany, according to Mr. West. As a result, when the first "Ultra" information was shown to military and political leaders, they tended to ignore it because they had learned to doubt SIS. Later, "Ultra" sent the organization's reputation soaring, but thanks to Philby and others, it has not endured.

Recently, scholars have taken an interest in intelligence matters, using newly released information to help understand the making of past policy. The 16 papers in "Knowing One's Enemies" lead to no major revisions of history, but provide fresh insights into the decision-making process at two of the turning points of Twentieth Century history.

These studies of how governments gauged each other before the two world wars may supply some basis for judging whether conditions today — in the era of the "super" powers — are better or worse than they were in 1914 and 1939.

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